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ABSTRACT

The characteristics and experiences of college freshmen who entered private black colleges in 1976 and 1985 were compared, based on data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's "The American Freshman: National Norms." Attention was focused on socioeconomic status (SES), academic preparation and confidence, reasons for attending college, financing an education, majors and careers, and important objectives and values. Findings include: the typical private historically-black college and university freshman had higher SES than the 1976 freshman; the percentage of 1985 freshmen with high school grade point averages of "B" or higher was significantly lower than their 1976 counterparts; the 1976 group of black freshmen had a greater concern about financing college than the 1985 group; business had increased significantly as a major and as a career expectation, and there has been a major revival of interest in engineering; for the 1985 group, the most important life object was to be well-off financially; and belief in personal popularity, leadership ability, and social self-confidence showed considerable growth since 1976. (SW)

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# Research Report

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## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIVATE BLACK COLLEGE FRESHMEN: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF BLACK LEADERSHIP IN AMERICA


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### Introduction

The historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), particularly those under private control, have been the foremost training ground for black leadership in America. As these institutions prepare to open their doors to the Class of 1990, they find themselves facing a national climate of indifference toward the goals for which the past generation of black leadership has labored so long and hard. If future leadership in the black community is to be trained by our private black colleges, it is to our advantage to know something about the origins and aspirations of our students as they enter our institutions. It would also be instructive to examine existing differences between the freshmen of the mid-1970's and those of the mid-1980's.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to compare the characteristics and experiences of the classes that entered the private black colleges in 1976 and 1985. The data for this study were based on the ACE/UCLA-sponsored Cooperative Institutional Research Program, which annually publishes The American Freshman: National Norms. This comparative analysis focuses on the following broad areas: socioeconomic status, academic preparation and confidence, reasons for going to college, financing an education, majors and careers, and important objectives and values.

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**Financing an Education**

While some concern about financing college is indicated by the majority of students, there has been an interesting shift. The 1976 group of black freshmen had a greater financial concern than the 1985 group, although only one out of three said finances were a major concern.

Eighty-five to ninety percent of the students received need-based aid, which is now complemented by a significant increase in merit-based aid. The increase in merit-based aid deserves some attention because black colleges probably cannot afford to engage in a protracted period of "buying" students, especially if they are in major competition with each other. As one might expect from the increase in parental income, the 1985 freshmen receive more parental support than their 1976 counterparts. It would appear that college costs are increasing more quickly than parental income, however, because loan indebtedness has risen considerably, especially Guaranteed Student Loans (GSL). Further compounding this problem is the significant increase in GSL debt at the upper limits of borrowing.

Table 4

| | 1976 | 1985 |
|---|---|---|
| Concern about Financing College | | |
| No concern | 22% | 28% |
| Major concern | 29% | 20% |
| Receiving need-based aid | 85% | 90% |
| Receiving merit-based aid | 34% | 45% |
| Parental support | | |
| None | 35% | 26% |
| Less than $500 | 60% | 45% |
| Less than $1,000 | 72% | 58% |
| Receiving a GSL | 10% | 31% |
| Receiving a GSL of $2,000 or more | 1% | 18% |

**Majors and Careers**

There are few surprises in these areas. Business has increased significantly as a major and as a career expectation, and there has been a major revival of interest in engineering. Education, physical science, arts and humanities are all less popular in 1985 than in 1976. It is interesting to note, however, that biology and medical career aspirations have decreased significantly from 1976 to 1985. It is also somewhat disconcerting to see that the decline in national interest in (and federal funding for) the arts, humanities, and scientific research are reflected so clearly in the aspirations of our students.

Table 5

| | 1976 | 1985 |
|---|---|---|
| Anticipated Major | | |
| Business | 18% | 25% |
| Biology | 11% | 6% |
| Arts and Humanities | 8% | 5% |
| Engineering | 7% | 14% |
| Education | 7% | 4% |
| Physical Sciences | 3% | 1% |
| Anticipated Career | | |
| Business | 17% | 23% |
| Physician/Dentist | 15% | 10% |
| Artist (including performance) | 10% | 3% |
| Engineering | 7% | 14% |
| Education | 6% | 2% |
| Research scientist | 1% | 1% |

**Important Objectives and Values**

Freshmen at private black colleges have followed national trends in these areas as well. Belief in personal popularity, leadership ability, and social self-confidence shows considerable growth since 1976, along with the drive to achieve. Students' political views have moved to the right, along with those of the rest of the nation. One out of five students in private black colleges considers him/herself conservative or right wing. By far, their most important life objective is to be well-off financially. While this seems to be true for all college students, it is even more so for private black college students. The 1985 group is more likely to feel that raising a family and having administrative responsibility are very important than were black freshmen in 1976.

There appears to be a return to "traditional American values." However, there is one area in which students in historically black private colleges still have significantly more interest than do most entering freshmen: developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

Table 6

| | 1976 | 1985 |
|---|---|---|
| Have drive to achieve | 76% | 72% |
| Have leadership ability | 53% | 58% |
| Have social self-confidence | 52% | 61% |
| Am popular | 36% | 51% |
| Conservative/right wing politically | 12% | 21% |
| Important to raise a family | 54% | 65% |
| Important to have administrative responsibility | 42% | 52% |
| Important to be well-off financially | 68% | 85% |
| Important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life | | |
| Freshmen in private black colleges | 72% | 63% |
| All freshmen | 61% | 43% |

Before discussing the comparative data of the 1976 and 1985 classes, it would be useful to look at the present state of black involvement in higher education. Research findings indicate that while the high school graduation rate for blacks has increased over the last decade, the rate of black high school graduates who go on to enroll in college has decreased. In addition, the increased opportunity for black students to attend traditionally white institutions has intensified the competition for students among historically black colleges.

**Socioeconomic Status**

The typical 1985 private HBCU freshman has higher socioeconomic status (SES) than the 1976 freshman. This naturally follows since parental income has risen significantly since 1976, and both parents, particularly the students' mothers, are more likely to be better educated. The effects of a smaller pool of black high school graduates enrolling in college and the increased competition among HBCUs discussed above may have significantly influenced the change in SES profile. The rising costs of private higher education and broader curricular opportunities at the less expensive public institutions may also explain much of this change.

Table 1

| | 1976* | 1985+ |
|---|---|---|
| Parental Income | | |
| Below $6,000 | 28% | 10% |
| $50,000 and above | 2.5% | 18% |
| Father's Education | | |
| Less than high school diploma | 32% | 21% |
| Baccalaureate or higher degree | 26% | 31% |
| Mother's Education | | |
| Less than high school diploma | 24% | 14% |
| Baccalaureate or higher degree | 29% | 35% |

*Percentages based on 3,300 students at 9 institutions (Female-55%; Male-45%)
+Percentages based on 2,464 students at 8 institutions (Female-58%; Male-42%)

**Academic Preparation**

The percentage of 1985 freshmen with high school GPAs of "B" or higher is significantly lower than their 1976 counterparts. However, the percentage of students who rate themselves above average in academic ability and intellectual self-confidence has increased noticeably. Their self ratings of superior writing and math skills showed modest gains. Aspirations for doctoral degrees have diminished somewhat, but one might attribute this to more realistic goal-setting and a shift in emphasis to professions which do not require the doctorate. This indicates that the level of student aspirations has not declined, but rather the focus of their education has changed.

Table 2

| | 1976 | 1985 |
|---|---|---|
| High School GPA of "B" or higher | 57% | 48% |
| Academic ability above average | 45% | 50% |
| Intellectual self-confidence above average | 58% | 70% |
| Writing ability above average | 39% | 42% |
| Math ability above average | 25% | 34% |
| Degree aspirations | | |
| B.A. or B.S. | 14% | 18% |
| Doctorate (academic or professional) | 47% | 41% |

**Reasons for Going to College**

Over the past decade, there has been remarkably little change in the major reasons students choose to attend college. The top five reasons, as reported by at least two-thirds of all freshmen, remain the same: to gain a general education, to learn more about things, to get a better job, to attend a top graduate school, and to make more money. However, the priorities among these five reasons have changed: getting a better job and making more money have gained in importance since 1976, and general education has declined slightly.

The primary reason students reported for choosing a particular college remains academic reputation. Somewhat surprising is the relatively low ranking of financial assistance by both groups, with only one-third of the students citing financial aid as important in their choice of a particular college. This response may be explained by the fact that students may be getting similar aid offers from several colleges, resulting in deflated importance for this item. Curiously, fewer than 10 percent of the freshmen in both groups believe that their college decision was greatly influenced by a teacher, guidance counselor, or college representative. This leads us to consider, "Who are their role models?"

Table 3

| | 1976 | 1985 |
|---|---|---|
| Reasons for Going to College | | |
| Gain a general education | 80% | 77% |
| Learn more about things | 80% | 81% |
| Get a better job | 78% | 89% |
| Go to a top graduate school | 73% | 75% |
| Earn more money | 67% | 81% |
| Reasons for Choosing This College | | |
| Academic reputation | 64% | 69% |
| Offered financial assistance | 30% | 35% |
| Recruited by a college representative | 9% | 9% |
| Advised by a teacher | 6% | 7% |
| Advised by a guidance counselor | 9% | 9% |

**Conclusion**

We have learned that our current freshmen are more concerned than their 1976 counterparts with personal wealth and position. They come from better-educated families and their educational aspirations are influenced by their second-generation college experience. There is an indication that how they apply their education in the world beyond college is as important as the accumulation of credentials. They are more confident in their academic and personal abilities; they wish to excel and they expect to achieve. In short, the values of the 1985 freshmen seem to reflect many of the values associated with mainstream America in the mid-1980's. Our students seem ready to assume a role in the business world or government and to slip quietly into the growing national upper middle class.

Our role as educators is to help these students expand their vision so as to encompass the societal as well as personal rewards of their education. Because so many of our students feel it is important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, and believe in their leadership ability, we have an opportunity to challenge them to grow. The tools for leadership are present, but how these tools are to be used has yet to be examined or understood. Will we develop a compassionate leadership elite for the community and the nation or simply develop an elite? We need to challenge the students to look to a broader responsibility. If we expect these students to provide leadership for the entire range of the black community, we must make sure that they are appreciative of their past and concerned about the future, not simply consumed by the present.

The Research Report is published by the Research Department of the United Negro College Fund, a consortium of forty-two private black colleges and universities. For information contact the Research Department, United Negro College Fund, Inc., 500 East 62nd Street, New York, New York 10021 — (212) 644-9612.

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